
**About the author:**

Dr. Kwame Bediako was Founder/Director of the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, an initiative of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana in research and advanced studies in the fields of Christian Faith and Thought and in the relationship of the Christian Church to society. He held two doctoral degrees, the first in Francophone Literature from the University of Bordeaux and the second in Divinity from the University of Aberdeen.

It was during his studies in France that he became convinced of the spiritual and intellectual coherence of the Christian Faith, and discovered the central importance of personal faith in Christ. This understanding motivated his subsequent theological studies in Scotland under Andrew Walls.

He wrote extensively in the fields of Gospel, culture and Christian identity, and in the development of new contextual theologies in Africa. His publications include *Theology and Identity—The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Regnum Books, 1992, reprinted 1999), *Christianity in Africa—The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh University Press; Orbis Books, 1995; reprinted 1997), and the volume under consideration here, which serves well as a representative overview of Dr. Bediako’s legacy.

Kwame Bediako, who passed away in June 2008, now enjoys eschatological verification, *knowing even as he is known*. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Gillian Mary Bediako, and their two sons, Timothy Yaw (24) and Daniel Kwabena (21).

**Thesis:**

This book is a representative selection of Bediako’s articles exploring his conviction that, as God reveals himself through African idioms in African contexts, an “African theology emerges to edify not only the African church but the Church world-wide.” (page xi) The two-fold purpose of this English-language volume is then (1) to encourage Africans to delve the depths of their worldviews, sacred traditions and cultures for the elements of an African theology and a unique Christian identity; and (2) to introduce the West to the Jesus that is the answer to African questions. Bediako’s legacy stands as an open-ended question: *Can/will the Church worldwide be edified and renewed by a uniquely African understanding of Jesus and the Gospel?*
Summary of Major Sections:

These essays are grouped into three major sections: (1) The African Experience of Jesus; (2) Theology and Culture; and (3) Africa and the History of Christianity.

In the first section, chapter one, Bediako exegetes the prayers of an illiterate Ghanaian midwife in order to plead for a theology grounded in everyday African experiences. He argues that theology born out of life experience must precede academic reflection. The task of the academic theologian is not to “construct” a theology but rather to clarify the universal significance of a particular faith community’s theology in the interest of the Gospel’s encounter with the wider world.

In chapter 2, Bediako begins with the biblical assumption of Jesus Christ’s universality before examining the particular role that ancestors play in African life. Jesus is described as the One who fulfills and surpasses the function of the Ancestor. Bediako biblically supports this viewpoint from the book of Hebrews, “a letter written to Africans.”

In chapter 3, the author asks the question of how Jesus is Lord in order to encourage theological engagement with other viewpoints in pluralistic contexts. He concludes that we answer this question through a demonstration that Jesus is able to inhabit other worldviews as the unique Lord. He cites three unique aspects of Christ’s life that confront all religious traditions (“traditions of response”): the incarnation, divine vulnerability in history; the cross, redemptive suffering; and the Lord’s table, reconciling fellowship. Thus, “authentic Christian apologetics implies providing, in Christ-like humility and in Christ-like vulnerability, the conditions that make it possible for others to perceive and recognize Jesus as Christ the Lord.” (p. 45)

In part 2, chapter 4, Bediako charts the course of African theology in terms of its continuity and discontinuity with “primal religion.” Primal religion is understood as Africa’s own knowledge of God prior to Western missionaries’ misrepresentation of it as “animism”. Bediako’s quest, and that of the modern African theologians he cites, is for the culturo-religious past that underlies a uniquely African Christian worldview and identity. To the extent that an African missionary engagement with primal religion has been successful, a similar endeavor may hold fresh promise for those who would engage post-Enlightenment Western culture with the Gospel. For Bediako, aspects of the post-modernist rejection of the Enlightenment “bear the marks of a primal worldview.”

In chapter 5, Bediako compares 2nd century theologians’ efforts to integrate existing culture into the Christian faith with modern African theologians’ missionary engagement of primal religion. This process of cultural engagement is diametrically opposed to the Western modernist tradition that “set the Gospel and culture against each other” and produced the modern missionary movement’s derogatory assessment of the primal worldview.

In chapter 6, One Song Many Tongues, Bediako examines what Andrew Walls has called the “infinite translatability” of the Gospel in order to encourage a “deepening awareness of the impact of culture on Christian thought.” The central idea is that each time the Gospel is translated into a different language, we have an opportunity to learn something new about God Incarnate.
In part 3, Bediako turns to the history of Christianity in Africa. In chapter 7, having stressed throughout the book the importance of the primal worldview to an African understanding of Jesus and the Gospel, Bediako helpfully delineates its common features: (1) human kinship with nature, (2) a sense of human weakness, (3) a personalized universe, (4) the awareness of spirits and invisible powers, (5) a sense of the after-life (the living dead, i.e. Ancestors), and (6) the oneness of the physical and the spiritual (a unified cosmos). It has long been assumed that the Gospel is more readily accepted within primal cultures, Bediako demonstrates why. These same world-view elements, he argues, could prove useful to questions about “human identity, community, ecological balance and justice” that currently preoccupy the Western mind. Bediako envisions a theology not of words and ideas but of living power “…the power of God to save all who believe.” (Roman 1:16)

In chapter 8, the author turns his attention to the relationship between African politics and Christianity. He charts the rise of post-independence African leaders who consolidated dictatorial power by assuming the sacred titles and roles ascribed to ancestors. Bediako argues that in Christian perspective the ancestors are “de-sacralised” since all authority belongs to God alone. Exemplified in the confrontation with Pilate, the way of Jesus reveals “a unique concept of power —the power of forgiveness over retaliation, of suffering over violence, of love over hostility, of humble service over domination.” The author asserts that Jesus’ cross neutralizes all the powers that have ruled in human history. Since in the primal worldview religion is conceived of as power, the way to true democracy in Africa involves the exercise of Jesus’ non-dominating power in public life. The Good News in Africa then is presented as human liberation from the ‘powers’ that rule human existence. The concrete expression of this freedom is found in the redeemed community’s counter-cultural relationship to ‘elemental forces’ (ethnicity, race, social class, culture and customs) and the presence of shalom. Democracy is not an end in itself for this redeemed community. Rather, the aim is to live now a biblical vision of the coming Kingdom.

In the final chapter, Bediako concludes with a re-visioning of church history that includes Africa as a new center within a World Christianity that has no one geographic center. “Every center is a potential periphery and vice versa.” This is not African self-congratulations but a call for good stewardship of the theological gifts that Africa has to offer the World Church. The Church is conceived as one and Church history as mission history, “a history of conversion, of the constant seeking and application of the mind of Christ to the issues and questions within a particular context.” The question stands: What is God teaching his church through the history and experience of Jesus and the Gospel in Africa? The one Church is diminished and poorer if she shuts her ears to the one song sung in many tongues to the One Savior of all the redeemed.
Relevance:

Bediako contributes to our understanding of the shift in Christianity’s center of gravity to the Southern hemisphere. What is happening in African Christianity provides fresh opportunities to reflect on how the Gospel engages culture, any culture. To ask how Jesus is Lord in any particular cultural context is a deeply penetrating question. Sober confidence that Jesus is able to inhabit any worldview as the unique Lord is a fruitful starting point for theological reflection and missional engagement. What if the Church in the West humbly confronted its own worldviews, practices, and religious traditions with the three unique aspects of Christ’s life that Bediako cites: the incarnation, divine vulnerability in history; the cross, redemptive suffering; and the Lord’s table, reconciling fellowship? How would Western culture be transformed if the Church were to practice Jesus’ non-dominating power in public life?

Critique:

While Bediako’s exploration of the continuities and discontinuities between Africa’s primal religion and Christianity is certainly helpful for correcting Western misrepresentations of “animism,” I find less convincing the assertion that the “primal worldview” holds promise for missional engagement with post-Enlightenment Western culture. The idea that Westerners might first explore “repressed European primal traditions” only then to discover the “true” Western Christian identity seems (at least to this Westerner) farfetched, unlikely, and unnecessary. Bediako is convinced not only of the universality of the Gospel but also of primal religion, the “basal forms of human religious experience.” The six common features of the primal worldview that he underlines (ch. 7) all find continuity in the Bible. Bediako’s purpose to shed positive light on Africa’s prior understanding of God and its continuity with the Gospel is commendable. I suspect however that a self-critical (African) assessment of the primal worldview would also reveal specific weaknesses. To have also taken fuller account in this volume of negative aspects of primal cultures would have shed even more light on the relationship between the Gospel and culture. While I agree that “humanity can(not) be fully defined in post-Enlightenment terms,” (p 60) it is unlikely that a primal vision is the key to that fullness either.

A far more promising approach would be, as Bediako himself suggests, to work first “from the actual historical achievement in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus” (p. 43) toward the translation and application of that achievement within post-modern Western culture. As God reveals himself in post-modern idioms in western urban contexts, a unique understanding of Jesus and the Gospel will also emerge to edify the Church world-wide.

‘Jesus fulfills and surpasses the function of the Ancestor,’ says the African Christian evangelist. ‘So what?’ shrugs the post-modern Westerner.

What is the next line in this conversation?